

CELIAC's 25 Years Teaching Native Speakers to Write Books in Indigenous Languages

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Abstract

CELIAC is the *Centro Editorial de Literatura Indígena, Asociación Civil*, or the Center for Native Language Publishing, in Oaxaca, Mexico. CELIAC is dedicated to the vitalization of indigenous languages of the Americas. It began in 1987 with support from Mexican government agencies and in 1993 it became an independent, not-for-profit organization. In 1994, the project moved into its own building in Oaxaca, Mexico. At CELIAC, Indian authors from Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America have learned to use computers to write books in their native languages. Several hundred people from Mexico, Peru, Bolivia and other countries have been through the program. Instruction is in Spanish and is done by other Indians. Books written by CELIAC authors are published and are available for sale.

Résumé

CELIAC est le *Centro Editorial de Literatura Indígena, Asociación Civil*, ou le Centre éditorial de littérature, une association civile située à Oaxaca, au Mexique. CELIAC est dédié à la revitalisation des langues autochtones des Amériques. Il a commencé en 1987 avec le soutien d'organismes gouvernementaux mexicains et, en 1993, il est devenu un organisme indépendant, sans but lucratif. En 1994, le projet a été emménagé dans son propre bâtiment à Oaxaca, au Mexique. Au CELIAC, des auteurs indiens du Mexique et d'ailleurs en Amérique latine ont appris à utiliser des ordinateurs pour écrire des livres dans leur langue maternelle. Des centaines de personnes en provenance du Mexique, du Pérou, de la Bolivie et d'autres pays ont suivi le programme. L'instruction est en espagnol et en est faite par d'autres Indiens. Les livres écrits par des auteurs de CELIAC sont publiés et sont disponibles à la vente.

Mexico, home of at least 64 indigenous languages, has seen a dramatic drop in the number of its native speakers. In a context of discrimination and migration affecting large sectors of the population, a major challenge confronting speakers of original Mexican languages is their own bias against traditional languages, which are thought to inhibit the economic progress of their youth.

CELIAC shares the idea that "*a living language is one that is still being acquired by children*" (Comrie 2003). It advances this goal by producing books written in indigenous languages.

The project is relatively simple: teach indigenous speakers to use a computer and an ordinary keyboard so they can write a book on a subject of their choice. A writing system is created with advice from the trainer, M. Salinas, and continuous feedback from the elders and other members of the community. When the book is finished, the result is presented to the communities. Local authorities and the whole population are invited to the event. Some people become emotional and shed tears when they see that their language too can be written! This enhances self-esteem and makes people proud of their mother tongue and culture and thus more likely to pass traditional knowledge on to younger generations.

Several teachers from indigenous communities (*maestros rurales*) have attended CELIAC's sessions and have easily learned how to type in their mother tongue. They are encouraged to share their computer skills with their pupils.

The priority is the production of books rather than the normalization of orthography. This occurs later, after a corpus of texts and speeches in indigenous languages has been created and people are able to compare and analyze the orthographic discrepancies. "*We cannot do it before, for the simple reason that we are illiterate in the writing of our mother tongue*," says Salinas. There are cases where people start analyzing the languages, before being fully aware of the complexity of their content.

CELIAC's work is also based on Cummins' (1979) interdependence hypothesis: learning of any language produces abilities which are later transferred to any other language, making it easier for children to become bi-literate or multi-literate. Daniel Wagner's (1993) research in Morocco shows how simple it is to achieve multiple literacy: rural students from two different mother tongues (Arab and Berber), who were learning to read French, didn't show any long term specific advantage by coming from one language or the other.

Finally, the elaboration of a corpus of information in native languages facilitates the production of dictionaries. Linguists can work for decades before producing a dictionary of 2,000-5,000 words. Salinas and Bernard's work produced a 232,000 word ethnography in less than ten years. The number of single entries has not been counted, but it is believed to be over 5,000, each of them occurring in one or more sentences of the corpus.

Up to now, CELIAC has directly trained hundreds of indigenous speakers, and printed about a dozen books.

The association looks forward to e-books as a more viable technology.

As an example of the work carried out at the Centre, we present a work in one of the endangered languages, *Chocholteco* or *Ingigua*, made possible by a FEL grant.

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